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# BIRD OBSERVATIONS FOR SPRING 2004 IN THE PROPOSED MESA EAST AND WEST DEVELOPMENT NEAR VALENCIA, CALIFORNIA

# Prepared for:

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# REVISED

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### Nature and Scope of Surveys

During the spring and early summer of 2004 surveys were conducted within the boundaries of the proposed Mesa Projects (Figure 1). Surveys were focused on determining presence or absence of California gnatcatcher, and followed U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Guidelines for this species. Surveys followed the protocol for non-NCCP areas, involving 6 surveys of each area, occurring between March 15 and June 30 (see Table 1 for exact dates). Each survey involved two observers and lasted about 4 hours (6:30 to 10:30 a.m.), with each observer covering an area less than 80 acres of suitable habitat.

Each survey was conducted on foot by observers well acquainted with both visual and auditory characteristics of southern California birds. Tapes of calls of California gnatcatcher were played periodically along survey routes in an attempt to elicit a response. Survey routes were designed to visit all areas within the Proposed Project Area. However, routes for regular coverage were selected through preliminary surveys and were designed to cover all areas of appropriate habitat for the focus species. Personnel for all surveys were David Crawford, Guy Bruyea and Scott Cameron, working under Federal Fish and Wildlife Service Permit numbers TE-821229-4 (Crawford), TE-837439-4 (Bruyea) and TE-808242 (Cameron), issued under section 10(a)(1)(A) of the Endangered Species Act.

#### Habitat Condition and Bird Observations

The Mesa Project involves an irregular area bounded on the east by Magic Mountain and on the west by a steep ridge separating the study area from the drainage of Long Canyon. On the north the area is bordered by the Santa Clara River. The southern boundary of the area is marked by cattle gates on the property boundary but not by any topographic feature (Figure 1).

The area surveyed consists of a series of canyons trending in a southeast to northwest direction and running down to the Santa Clara River. Although there is no stream flow

within these canyons, the more narrow canyons support a dry woodland of oak and sycamore which can be dense in places, forming a closed canopy over the canyon bottoms. Wider canyons have a sandy soil and support a Great Basin sage community.

Some of the mesa tops between the canyons have, at various times, been used as agricultural fields and some of these areas were under active cultivation during this study. Agriculture on the other mesas has been abandoned and these mesas now support introduced grasses and weeds, a few of the hardier coastal sage plants, and tree tobacco.

At one time the whole area, except for its westernmost portion, was an active oil field. The oil operations have been since removed and many pads and access roads plowed. These areas support grasses and non-native weeds.

Except for dry woodlands in the canyon bottoms, the whole area was probably once covered by sage scrub and chaparral communities. Today, due to cattle grazing, past agricultural activities and oil field road and pad construction, much of the area is pastureland covered with introduced grasses and weeds. Sage scrub grading into chaparral survives in dense stands on the steeper hillsides. On more gradual slopes grazing activities have broken the coastal sage community into more isolated and open patches containing many introduced grasses. Surveys concentrated on areas of sage scrub where species preferred by California gnatcatcher, California sage (Artemesia californica) and buckwheat (Eriogonum sp.) predominated and where the slope was less than 40%. (Federal Register, 2003).

The avifauna of the Mesa area (Table 1) consists of species common to the coastal sage community with mourning dove, California quail, Bewick's wren, western scrub jay, California and spotted towhee and rufous-crowned sparrow being the common species. Less abundant are species of a dry oak woodland (acorn and Nuttall's woodpecker) Swallows nesting on cliffs along the Santa Clara River were frequently observed foraging over the area. House finch, orioles and phainopepla were common in elderberry and tree tobacco. Pastureland supported lark sparrow and mourning dove.

Observations of all birds are shown in Table 1. The numbers shown are of birds seen and heard, with heard individuals forming the majority of the observations. Numbers vary between censuses for several reasons. Some censuses were not complete but, rather, were focused on particular places or areas. Also, bird activity varies with season. Different species breed at different times of the year. In general, species are most easily observed when they are actively defending territories by song during the establishment of breeding pairs. Once pairs are established and nesting begins song often decreases and the numbers of birds observed, therefore, also decreases. After young leave the nest, numbers observed increase. Thus, for most resident species, numbers of adult birds are most accurately censused in April and May, when territorial activity is at a maximum. A few species such as Anna's hummingbird that nest early in the season may be underestimated. Many species that nest in the area also migrate through the area to more northern portions of their ranges. Thus, numbers of nesting species observed in May, which include migratory birds passing through the area, do not give an accurate count of actual resident birds.

# Comments on Threatened and Endangered Species

# California Gnatcatcher (Polioptila californica)

The California Gnatcatcher is listed as a Threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act. Survey routes were selected to cover prime habitat for California Gnatcatcher, namely, stands of dense Coastal Sage Scrub. Surveys followed the protocol for non-NCCP areas, involving 6 surveys of each area, occurring between March 15 and June 30 (see Table 1 for exact dates). Each survey involved two observers and lasted about 4 hours (6 to 10 am), with each observer covering an area containing about 80 acres of suitable habitat. Although all areas of coastal sage scrub habitat were surveyed, particular attention was placed on more open scrub areas dominated by California sage as this type of vegetation has been shown to be preferred by gnatcatchers (Federal Register, 2003). Tapes of California gnatcatcher calls were played at regular intervals along all survey routes. No California gnatcatchers were heard or observed during this study.

#### Comments on Sensitive Species

## Cooper's Hawk (Accipiter cooperi)

Cooper's hawk is considered a Species of Special Concern by the State of California. Cooper's hawks nest in woodlands along the Santa Clara River immediately north of the Mesas area. A single Cooper's hawk was observed hunting in the Mesas area on April 13.

#### Loggerhead Shrike (Lanius ludovicianus)

This is a California Special Concern species. Shrikes are resident in the sage scrub areas and one was observed in suitable nesting habitat in the study area.

#### Southern California Rufous-crowned Sparrow (Aimophila ruficeps canescens)

This species is considered a California Special Concern species by the Department of Fish and Game and is also a Federal Special Concern species. Rufous-crowned sparrows are a fairly common resident and breeding species in coastal sage habitat throughout the study site.

#### Lawrence's Goldfinch (Carduelis canescens)

This species, which occurs sporadically in chaparral habitat, is a highest priority species on the Audubon Birds to Watch list for 1996 and is a Bird of Management

Concern for the Fish and Wildlife Service. A single Lawrence's goldfinch was observed on April 27<sup>th</sup>.

# Summary

California gnatcatcher were not observed during this study. Four Species of Concern were observed. These species, the Southern California rufous-crowned sparrow, Cooper's hawk, Lawrence's goldfinch and loggerhead shrike, are all resident in the area in low density and breed either on the site or nearby.

#### References

Federal Register, 2003. Endangered and Threatened Wildlife and Plants; Designation of Critical Habitat for the Coastal California Gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) and Determination of Distinct Vertebrate Population for the California Gnatcatcher *Polioptila californica*). Vol 68, no 79 April 24, 2003, p. 20228.

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Endangered Species and Sp				Surveys				
SPECIES	STATUS	3/30	4/13		5/4	<u>5/18</u>	6/9	
T. J V. 16	<u> </u>	<del>                                     </del>		0		4		
Turkey Vulture	S	2	0	0	5		3	
Red-tailed Hawk	r	3	2	1	1		2	
American Kestrel	l <del>i</del>	0		Ö	0		<del></del>	
California Quail	†	24		30+	18		30+	
Killdeer	r			0	0		0	
Rock Dove	r	2	5	Ō	30+	11	0	
Mourning Dove	٢	- 8	9	11	6	8	11	
Greater Roadrunner	r	0	0	2	0	0	0	
White-th. Swift	r	0	2	0	0	0	0	
Black-chinned Hummingbird	5	0	1	0	0		0	
Anna's Hummingbird	r	4	3	3	2		6	
Costa's Hummingbird	s	0	0	1	0		0	
Acom Woodpecker	<u>  r                                   </u>	4	0	0	1		0	
Nuttall's Woodpecker	r	0	0	0	1		0	
Northern Flicker	r	1 1	1	1	1		0	
Black Phoebe	<u>  r                                   </u>	0	2	0	0		0	
Say's Phoebe	<u> </u>	0	1	0	0		0	
Western Kingbird	S	7	2	4	1		3	
Loggemead Shinke Wastern Scrub Jay		19	5 5	8	10		4	
American Crow	1   e	4	6	3	7		9	
Common Raven	<del></del>	1 7	1	2	<del></del>		2	
Violet-green Swallow	s	Ö	0	2	<u>0</u>	I	0	
N. Rough-winged Swallow	S	<del>                                     </del>	4	7	1	8	8	
Cliff Swallow	s	0	6	6	5		12	
Bushtit	r	6	7	4	2		<del></del>	
Bewick's Wren	r	11	5	6	4		11	
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	r	Ö	1	0	0	0	0	
Western Bluebird	r	0	2	2	0	0	Ö	
Wrentit	٢	6	4	4	2		5	
Northern Mockingbird	r	2	2	2	2		9	
California Thrasher	r	5	1	1	3		2	
European Starling	٢	3	0	0	0		0	
Phainopepla	r	0	2	0	0		2	
Yellow-rumped Warbler	w,m	2	0	0	0		0	
Common Yellowthroat	r	0	0	1	7		0 24	
Spotted Towhee	r	30+	7	10 17	12		30+	
California Towhee		30+ 65	7 25 2 2 10			307 307	307	
Rufous crowned Sparrows		0	0	2	0	1	3	
Savannah Sparrow	w,	0	0	2		Ö	0	
Song Sparrow	Γ	0		1	0	0	0	
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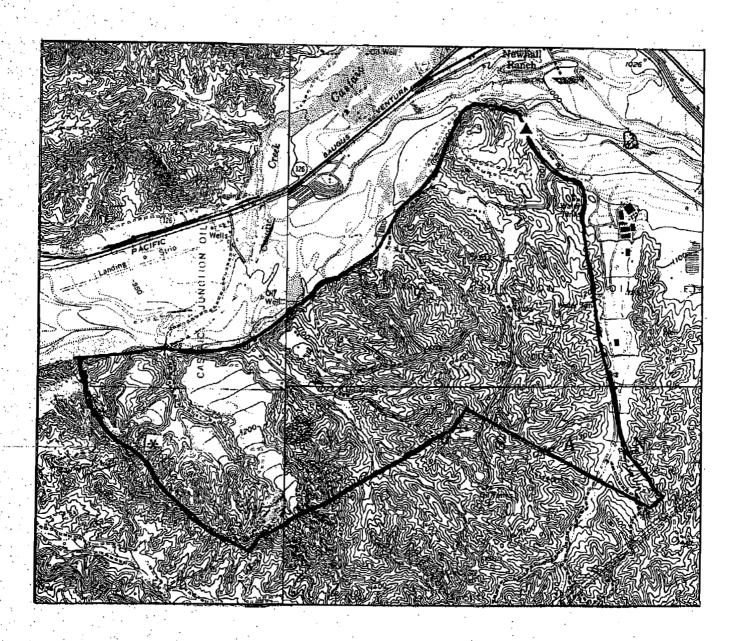
SPECIES			Dates of	Surveys	<u>5/4</u>	5/18	6/9
	STATUS	3/30	4/13	4/27			
White-crowned Sparrow	w,m	9	0	0	0	0	0
Red-winged Blackbird	s	0	4	2	1	2	1
Bullock's Oriole	s	0	0	1	1	3	3
House Finch	г	11	7	4	8	6	6
esser Goldfinch	r	0	1	3	0	3	0
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Figure 1. Outline of Mesa Project, east and west.



Base Map: U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute topographic map for Newhall, 1952 and Val Verde, 1968, California, both photorevised 1988.